Developing Verbal and Visual Literacy through Experiences in the Visual Arts
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YC Young Children; Jan 2008; 63, 1; ProQuest Central
pg. 74

Developing Verbal and Visual Literacy through Experiences in the Visual Arts

25 Tips for Teachers

Margaret H. Johnson

A toddler can point out animals such as dogs, rabbits, and ducks in picture books. Preschoolers are generally able to denote a person by drawing a circle with lines for arms and legs; imagery becomes more complex and expressive as they add faces, fingers, and clothes. Young children convey visual messages through painting and drawing, modeling with clay, creating collages, and constructing with found materials. Just as children learn to read and write by constructing and decoding words, they learn to create and decode visual symbols and ideas; they develop visual literacy.

While *verbal literacy* is a term commonly understood by educators, *visual literacy* may be less familiar. Visual literacy is the ability to create visual messages and to "read" messages contained in visual communications; to perceive, understand, interpret, and, ultimately, to evaluate one's visual environment (Eisner 1978, 2002).

Visual literacy in the aesthetic domain includes being able to talk about art in addition to making it. Adding talk about art as a component of visual art activities extends children's experiences in, and understanding of, visual messages communicated through media such as film, advertising, and, of course, works of art.

Best practices for art experiences with young children include providing developmentally appropriate activities, materials, and equipment (Colbert & Taunton 1992; Bredekamp & Copple 1997). Adults must provide time and space for young children to explore a variety of materials, such as crayons and markers; different colors, sizes, and textures of papers and fabrics; media, such as paints and clay; and tools, such as brushes, hole punches, scissors, sticks, plastic cutlery, tape, and paste. In addition, adults can extend young children's learning by talking with them about art and art making. Such practices help children to develop visual and verbal expression through active experiences with the visual arts and are essential for visual literacy.

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Visual literacy is the ability to create visual messages and to "read" messages contained in visual communications.

Questioning and dialogue about art as strategies to develop visual literacy

Art experiences that include questioning and dialogue may be called *art talk.* (The tips section that follows suggests appropriate questions and conversation starters to use with young children.) How teachers use art talk with children and how they encourage them to share such talk determine how well the children express themselves with art media and art language. Teachers can encourage young children's reflections about art (Taunton 1983) by listening to what they say about their work and asking questions in response to their comments. Appropriate questions fall into five categories (adapted from Johnson & Johnson-Grafe 2005). Teachers can ask children questions about

- **Ideas.** Tell me (us) more about your idea(s).
- **Process.** How did you make your artwork (painting, sculpture, collage)?
- **Materials.** What materials (or tools) did you use?
- **Knowledge** (concepts, vocabulary, artists studied). What kinds of shapes did you use? Did you use shapes like Henri Matisse did? Are you using colors like Romare Bearden did?
- **The future.** What will you make next? What would you like to learn more about (or how to do)?

Probing questions (Schirrmacher 1997) such as these are open ended and nonjudgmental. They encourage children to reflect about the artwork they and others have made and encourage children's visual perception, visual thinking, and reflective intelligence.

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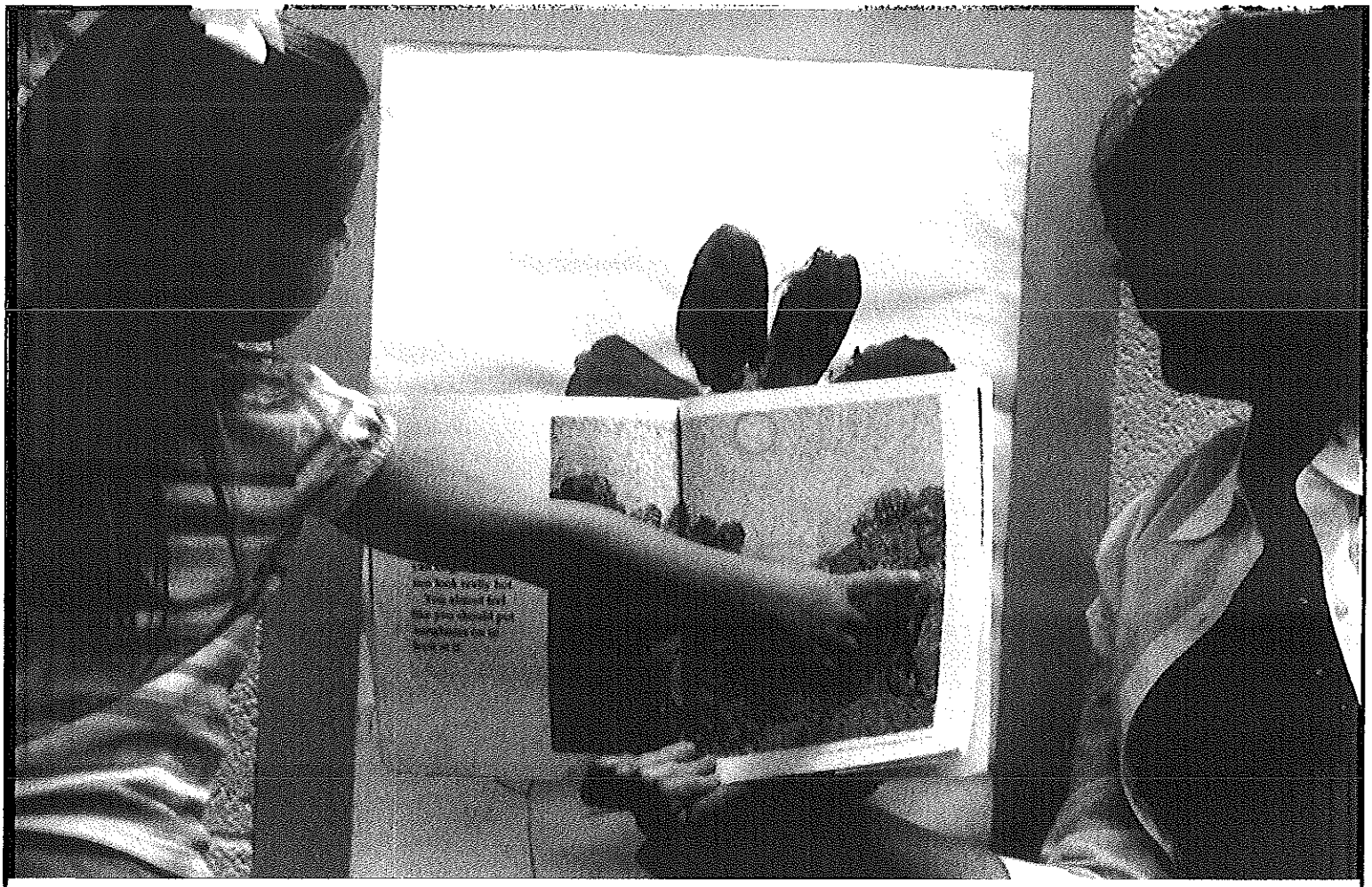

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Visual literacy in the aesthetic domain: Twenty-five tips for teachers

Teachers can use the following suggestions to facilitate art expression, both verbal and visual, of children from preschool through first grade. For the purposes of this article, I have revised and expanded the suggestions from my book with Althouse and Mitchell (2003, 136–37). These ideas focus on three aspects of conversing with children about their artwork: talking, extension, and reflection.

Talking about art introduces concepts such as color, line, shape/form, pattern, or texture. Extension practices help to develop simple concepts into more complex ideas; teachers encourage children to come up with new ways and materials to express their ideas artistically. Teachers can help young children reflect on their art experiences and consider their products through carefully constructed questions in individual interviews or during children's presentations at an Artists Circle.

Talking

1. Use correct art terms. Say, "You made green, a secondary color," or ask, "Can you point out some free-form shapes in your collage?" Create or purchase posters that illustrate these terms and display them for ready reference.

2. Ask convergent questions. Questions like "What color did you make?" or "What artist did you say this painting reminded you of?" help children recognize what they already know.

3. Ask divergent questions. Such questions are open ended and promote discovery: "What are some materials (media) you could use in your farm picture?" "What ideas do you have about this collage? What can you find to use in our scraps box?" Use the word *idea* in a variety of concrete contexts, as this word is abstract with many possibilities for interpretation.

4. State a problem and help children find a solution. For example, "It's hard to see the blue lines on blue paper. I wonder if it would be easier to see your drawing if you used a different color crayon. What other colors could you use that would show up on blue paper?"

5. Encourage children to discuss and solve art problems. If children are building a cardboard school bus, you could ask "How will you make windows?" and wait for their response. Have a variety of materials on hand, such as cardboard boxes and pre-cut flat cardboard in different sizes and shapes; colored cellophane and other papers; tape and scissors.

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6. Encourage private speech. A child making a house says to himself, "I am going to use this small box to make my house. I am going to make a roof on it. Here is a box I can use for that." Berk and Winsler (1995) describe several types of private speech, including fantasy play, emotional release, and self-direction.

7. Encourage children to talk to each other about their art as they work. As Nadine watches Alex paint, say, "Alex, tell Nadine about your picture. How did you make brown paint for the gerbils?"

8. Encourage writing. Say to a young child, "Would you like to write an artist statement for your painting? If you tell me about your idea, I will write it on this paper." Older children may scribble or write their own artist statements. Later the teacher can translate and write it for display, posting the statement near the artwork. Thinking processes become apparent when ideas and artistic processes are explained and displayed along with the artwork.

9. Label the child's actions. Give the child the necessary vocabulary: "Jonah, you have rolled your clay to make coils. What will you make with them?" Such questions are especially effective when the child's attention is flagging.

10. Assess children's art progress. Use an art talk or an art skills and concepts checklist. The checklist can be a basic inventory or snapshot of artistic/aesthetic skills and concepts and the development of visual and verbal literacy. (See Althouse, Johnson, & Mitchell 2003, 131–32.)

Extension

The following tips can help to extend children's thinking from simple concepts to more complex ideas.

11. Model new art concepts and processes. Say out loud: "I want a lighter tint of blue for my sky. I'll add more white to my paint. Now it's the shade of blue I wanted." Doing so models creative problem solving and is a useful strategy when working in what Vygotsky called zones of proximal development (see Berk & Winsler 1995; Bodrova & Leong 1996).

12. Give children firsthand experiences to develop concepts and stimulate art expression. When a class goes outside to observe the weather, instead of writing about it, have them draw pictures. Have children consider how the weather makes them feel; acknowledge differences in their perceptions.

13. Share art experiences. Listen to what children say to each other about their artwork. Encourage children to describe the processes they are using to create a product. At group time remind children of something said earlier about an artwork.

14. Talk with children about artists from various cultures and countries. Show the children artwork by several well-known artists, such as Claude Monet, Faith Ringgold, and Georgia O'Keeffe. You will be introducing children to a French Impressionist artist, an African American artist, and two female artists. Ask children to point out their observations and perceptions with specific references to one or more of the works of art. Additional examples include traditional crafts, such as the Gee's Bend quilts from Alabama, Inuit carvings, and masks from Africa and Asia.

15. Refer to children as artists. Show children how artists sign paintings, stamp pottery, and inscribe sculptures. Emily always signs her name on each page of the books she makes. Her teacher notes, "Emily signs her name on her work. She is an artist."

16. Connect concepts across the curriculum. For example, use a Venn diagram to compare works of art, saying, "Look at this painting by Claude Monet and this collage by Henri Matisse. What colors are alike? What shapes do you see? What shapes are the same? Which ones are different?" Children can learn about concepts, such as under, over, beside, above, and below, when they point out and describe these qualities in art works (Newton 1995).

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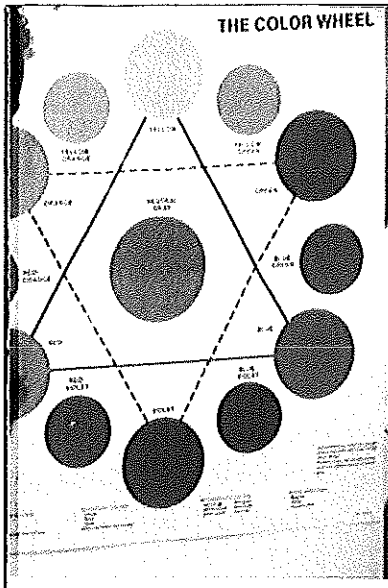

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17. Connect art with other areas of learning. For example, after a visit to a pet store, encourage children to create their own pet store. Provide simple geometric shapes, markers, hole punches, buttons, craft sticks, and glue or tape, so that children can make stick puppets to revisit and build on what they learned at the pet store.

18. Extend the children's thinking about art and related subjects. Ask the children to describe their plan for a block structure (plans can be changed or abandoned). Have them draw a map of their route to school and then discuss it. Drawing from the example of story quilts, older children might be interested in comparing Harriet Powers's story quilts with those of Faith Ringgold. One of these African American artists was born into slavery in 1837; the other is a contemporary artist and author of children's books. (Teachers can use *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers,* by Mary E. Lyons, as a resource.) Beyond art concepts, story quilt content can reflect and instruct about different eras and cultures.

Reflection

After children have completed their artwork, teachers help them revisit their experience with art media and their artistically expressed ideas. During interviews, teachers can check for individual understanding of art concepts; during reflection at Artists Circle time, children can validate their ideas. They can think of themselves as artists, thinking as artists do.

19. Focus children's attention on the way they use art media. Say, "I see you drew circles with the blue marker." This statement directs a child's attention to her actions with art media, and uses basic art vocabulary (colors, shapes, media). Encourage children to talk about their artwork so they can connect their ideas and actions: "What were you thinking about when you drew circles with the blue marker?"

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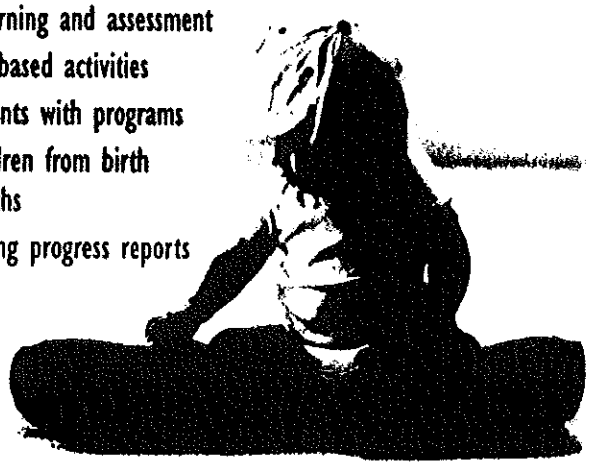

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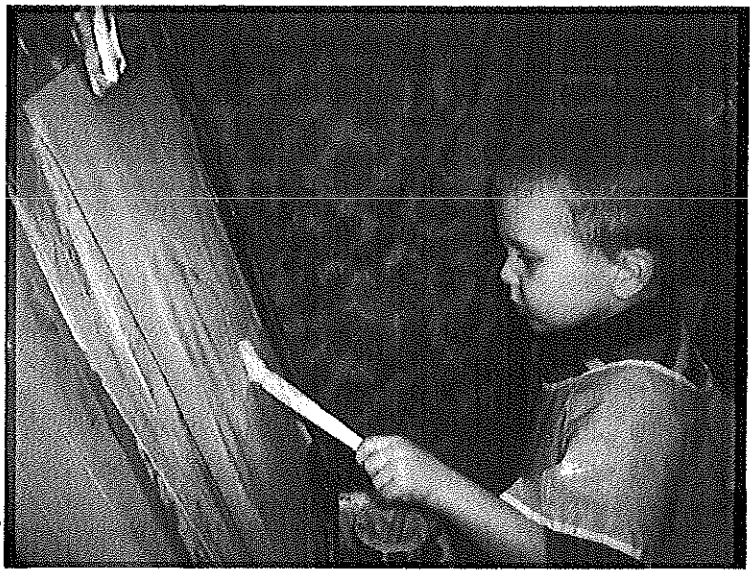
20. Make sure children understand art concepts and techniques. Ask, "How did you make green paint?" "What happened to this line? Where does it end?" "How did you use the lines to make this picture interesting?"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21. Give children time to think. Pose questions about art processes and wait for the children to respond: "How did you paint your picture? What did you do first?" Reflection is an important part of the art process. Do not rush children to answer; give them "think time."

Remember, though, that some children may not be ready or able to articulate their ideas. They may be simply exploring media, enjoying the sensory pleasures of the art process. On these occasions, teachers should simply make brief statements about the work and not ask questions. When children are ready to talk about their artwork, they will do so. A statement such as "Teacher, I made brown with my paint" indicates a child's readiness to talk about the art medium and processes he has experienced.

22. Encourage children to reflect on the steps they took in their art experiences. When a child spends several days on a painting or sculpture, it is clear that she is developing her ideas through that art medium; talk with the child about the changes you have observed over time. Using a digital camera, keep a photographic record of the changes to discuss later with the child.

23. Have a weekly Artists Circle so that children can show and share their work. Ask children to talk about their ideas, the processes and materials they used, and what they might want to make next.

In an interview with the teacher, a child may say, "I drew my pets—a cat, a gerbil, and a dog." The teacher responds, "Tell me more about what is around your picture." The child answers, "I made a lot of stars." The teacher continues, "The way you placed the stars around your picture gives it a border, and the border makes me think you love your pets. It reminds me of how much I love my own dog." Such statements can help children discover the effects of their artwork on the viewers; how particular colors, forms, and media express meanings; and how the artwork can evoke recollections and memories.

Later, during Artists Circle, the teacher may call attention to this child's border of stars, pointing out the way the border adds feeling to the artwork. At the same time, the teacher introduces the concept of *border* to the group and how the border the young artist created might produce recollections and feelings in the viewer. Other children are welcomed to comment about what they see in the artwork, what it reminds them of, and what new ideas they have from seeing the artwork and hearing from the artist.

24. Keep and review art portfolios with children. Once a month ask each young artist, "Which picture do you like best? What do you like about it?" Begin by listening to what children have to say about their work, then extend their thinking by asking questions in response.

25. Ask a child to invite several friends to join the review. Children enjoy sharing their artwork with others. In addition to learning about media, processes, and forms and symbols, children can learn about ideas expressed through art, such as loving one's pet, and meanings, such as how a border can bring emphasis to an idea. Teachers might invite the other children to say one thing they especially like about the artwork or talk about an idea that the artwork gives them. It is best to allow only positive comments and only one comment or question per child so everyone will have time to contribute.

Conclusion

Art making is often a social activity for young children; talking together, they develop language and socioemotional skills. Children begin to think

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artistically when teachers consider verbal and visual literacy as complements in young children's art experiences. As Vygotsky ([1934] 1962) emphasized, higher forms of mental activity are constructed and transferred to children through dialogue with other people. By engaging young children in talking about artwork, teachers help them actively focus on aspects of their artwork and that of others; build vocabulary; deepen perceptions; reflect on the effects of media, process, and images; and communicate the ideas and meanings they discover.

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but these words can remain unsaid or misunderstood when adults do not attend to their development. Beyond fostering the artistic development of the young children we work with through media and processes, we must also guide children's aesthetic development—verbal and visual literacy in the aesthetic domain. Otherwise, their art may be misinterpreted or neglected and the young artists' meanings never communicated.

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Adapted and expanded from Rosemary Althouse, Margaret H. Johnson, and Sharon T. Mitchell, *The Colors of Learning: Integrating the Visual Arts into the Early Childhood Curriculum,* New York: Teachers College Press; Washington, DC: NAEYC, 136–37.

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